

# Evidence for Extending Anomalous Miocene Volcanism at the Edge of the East Antarctic Craton

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## Key Points:

- Olivine basalt, hyaloclastite erratics and detrital zircon at Earth's southernmost moraine (Mt. Howe) indicate magmatic activity 17- 25 Ma.
- The source, indicated by a magnetic anomaly (-740 nT) ~400 km inland from the West Antarctic Rift margin, expands extent of Miocene lavas.
- Data corroborate lithospheric foundering beneath southern Transantarctic Mountains based on location of volcanism (duration < 5 my).

## Abstract

Using field observations followed by petrological, geochemical, geochronological, and geophysical data we infer the presence of a previously unknown Miocene subglacial volcanic center ~230 km from the South Pole. Evidence of volcanism is from boulders of olivine-bearing amygdaloidal/vesicular basalt and hyaloclastite deposited in a moraine in the southern Transantarctic Mountains.  $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  ages from five specimens plus U-Pb ages of detrital zircon from glacial till indicate igneous activity 25-17 Ma. The likely source of the volcanism is a circular -735 nT magnetic anomaly 60 km upflow from the sampling site. Subaqueous textures of the volcanics indicate eruption beneath ice or into water at the margin of an ice mass during the early Miocene. These rocks record the southernmost Cenozoic volcanism in Antarctica and expand the known extent of the oldest lavas associated with West Antarctic rift system. They may be an expression of lithospheric foundering beneath the southern Transantarctic Mountains.

## 1. Introduction

The geology of the Antarctic interior remains poorly characterized because ice covers 99.8 % of the bedrock (Burton-Johnson et al., 2016). In contrast to remote sensing studies that have provided indirect information about Antarctic's subglacial topography, crustal architecture, and magnetic anomalies on regional to continental scales (e.g., Studinger et al., 2006; Block et al., 2009), sampling of bedrock has mostly been limited to the exposures in mountain ranges and nunataks. Palmer et al. (2012) showed that nunatak moraines can be valuable repositories of previously unknown bedrock buried beneath the ice sheet. The erratics and detrital minerals transported by ice and finally deposited in moraines can be used to make inferences about unexposed geologic terrains (e.g., Goodge et al., 2010; Welke et al., 2016).

In this paper we describe the texture, chemistry and age of hyaloclastite and amygdaloidal/vesicular basalt erratics from Earth's southernmost moraine, located at the base of Mt. Howe. We integrate this information with other geochronological and geophysical datasets to infer the likely subglacial source of these rocks. The results have valuable implications for models linking uplift of the Transantarctic Mountains (TAM) with the West Antarctic Rift system. Many mechanisms have been proposed to explain the high elevation of the TAM (e.g., Stern and tenBrink, 1989; Fitzgerald, 2002; Bialas et al., 2007), but none has found widespread acceptance (Shen et al., 2018). Recently, Shen et al. (2018) described new evidence for lithospheric foundering beneath the southern Transantarctic Mountains that provides a mechanism for TAM uplift, but also an explanation for anomalous volcanism in this area. Consequences of delamination include basalt extrusion and silicic intrusion (Bird, 1979).

Major extension of the West Antarctic Rift system began in the Cretaceous ca. 105 Ma and continued into the Cenozoic, with basaltic volcanism beginning in the mid-Cenozoic (e.g. Behrendt et al., 1996; Siddoway, 2008). Most of the Cenozoic volcanics in Antarctica discovered

thus far occur across West Antarctica and along the Antarctic Peninsula (e.g., van Wyck de Vries et al., 2017). They also cluster along some segments of the seaward margin of the Transantarctic Mountains, as the McMurdo Volcanic Group (Fig. 1) (e.g., Kyle, 1990). Two outliers are Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early, isolated volcanic centers along the inland margin of the Scott Glacier (Fig. 1). At these two sites, olivine basalts, including hyaloclastites and pillow basalts, were erupted in the early Miocene onto a striated bedrock surface (Stump et al., 1980). Volcanic textures and stratigraphic relationships were used to infer that glacial ice must have been present in the area of the Scott Glacier in the early Miocene, thus providing information about the early East Antarctic ice sheet history, but leaving open the question about why volcanism occurred in this area. Our findings expand the extent of Miocene volcanism in the southern TAM, and provide evidence related to the lithospheric foundering model (Shen et al., 2018).

## **2. Setting and Methods**

### *2.1 Geological study site*

As part of a larger study of the provenance of glacial till of the Scott Glacier, a suite of erratic volcanic clasts was discovered on the surface of the Mt. Howe moraine, 290 km from the South Pole (Fig. 1). This ~ 2 km x 8.5 km ice-cored moraine occurs in a blue ice area at the base of the Mt. Howe nunatak. Bedrock exposures at Mt. Howe consist of siliciclastic rocks and coals of the Permian Buckley Formation, intruded by sills of Jurassic Ferrar Dolerite (Doumani and Minshew, 1965). The moraine is in a cirque-like embayment along the lateral margin of the Scott Glacier. Here sub- and englacial material transported by the Scott Glacier is brought to the surface, emerging as debris rich bands, similar to the process described by Bader et al. (2017). Sublimation of the ice exposes the debris and results in till accumulation on the surface of glacial ice over time. Debris thickness near the Scott Glacier margin is <1 cm and increases to >15 cm

near the base of the nunatak. The catchment area for the Scott Glacier extends inland from Mt. Howe ~115 km and ice velocity is generally <10 m/yr (Rignot et al., 2011).

## *2.2 Geochronological and geochemical analysis*

Eleven cobbles of amygdaloidal/vesicular basalt and hyaloclastites were collected from across the moraine surface and a subset was analyzed via thin section, whole rock geochemistry, and  $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  geochronology. This dataset is complemented by data from a total field magnetic anomaly survey (Studinger et al., 2006) and detrital zircon geochronology studies of Mt. Howe moraine till (Schilling, 2010).

Zeolite-free groundmass fragments were isolated from five samples for  $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  dating, which complement geochemical analyses on these samples. Potential sources of excess Ar, such as xenoliths and ultramafic nodules (Armstrong, 1978), were not observed and are not apparent from the character of the data. The fragments were irradiated for eight hours with Cd shielding, in the TRIGA reactor at USGS Denver, along with Fish Canyon sanidine-monitor standard (age of  $28.201 \pm .046$  Ma; Kuiper et al., 2008). Samples were packaged in Ta tubes and incrementally heated with a 50-Watt diode laser at LDEO, and extracted argon from each step was measured on a VG5400 noble gas mass spectrometer. Ages were calculated from Ar isotope ratios corrected for mass fractionation, interfering nuclear reactions, procedural blanks, and atmospheric Ar contamination.

U and Pb isotopic compositions of zircon were analyzed by laser ablation multicollector inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (LA-MC-ICPMS) at the Arizona LaserChron Center following the method of Gehrels et al. (2006). Zircon was ablated with a New Wave/Lambda Physik DUV193 Excimer laser (operating at a wavelength of 193 nm) using a spot diameter of 20 microns. All measurements were made in static mode, using  $10^{11}$  ohm Faraday detectors for  $^{238}\text{U}$ ,  $^{232}\text{Th}$ ,  $^{208}\text{Pb}$ , and  $^{206}\text{Pb}$ , a  $10^{12}$  ohm faraday collector for  $^{207}\text{Pb}$ , and an

ion-counting channel for  $^{204}\text{Pb}$ . Ion yields are  $\sim 1.0$  mv per ppm. Each analysis consisted of one 20-second integration with the laser off (for backgrounds), 20 one-second integrations with the laser firing, and a 30 second wait to flush out the previous sample. Common Pb correction was done by using the measured  $^{204}\text{Pb}$  and assuming an initial Pb composition from Stacey and Kramers (1975). Every fifth measurement a standard, a Sri Lanka zircon crystal ( $564 \pm 4$  Ma) was used to correct for the fractionation of Pb isotopes, generally  $\sim 2\%$ . Uncertainty resulting from the calibration correction is generally 1-2% (2-sigma) for both  $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{207}\text{Pb}$  and  $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{238}\text{U}$  ages. Interpreted ages are based on  $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{238}\text{U}$  (Gehrels et al., 2006).

For geochemical analysis, five representative samples showing the least alteration were coarsely crushed and visible zeolites /sediment fragments were removed from the sample before powdering. Samples were analyzed by XRF and ICP-MS in two labs: the XRF Laboratory at Michigan State University using a Bruker S4 Pioneer WDXRF or at Washington State's GeoAnalytical Lab where major and trace elements are run on the same sample material using a ThermoARL automated sequential wavelength XRF spectrometer (Johnson et al., 1999). Loss on ignition (LOI) was determined by heating a sample aliquot at  $900^\circ\text{C}$  for 16 hours and comparing weights before and after heating.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Petrography and Geochemistry*

The eleven volcanic cobbles collected from the Mt. Howe moraine fall into two categories based on hand specimen observation: amygdaloidal/vesicular basalts ( $n=8$ ) and hyaloclastites ( $n=3$ ) (Fig. S1). All thin sections show variolitic textures in the groundmass but varying degrees of vitrification (Fig. S2a and S2b). All basalts are olivine bearing and most show skeletal olivine in thin section (Fig. S2c). Thin sections also reveal variable chemical weathering (syndepositional) between specimens, as indicated by altered feldspars and iddingsite. All the

samples analyzed geochemically are basalts that cluster around the alkaline/subalkaline boundary and at the tholeiitic/calc-alkaline boundary. Their chemistry is similar to silica-poor northern Victoria Land volcanics from the ANDRILL AND-2A core collected in southern McMurdo Sound (Fig. 2) (Panter et al., 2009). The Mt. Howe samples are also geochemically similar to volcanic clasts from Mt. Early and Sheridan Bluff (Fig. 2). All samples are classified as within-plate basalts when plotted on trace element discrimination diagrams using Zr,Y, Ti, Nb and as continental basalts using the La/10-Y/15-Nb/8 discrimination diagram (Rollinson, 1993). Amygdaloidal volcanics have both zeolite and quartz filled vesicles that constitute 10-20% (by volume) of the rocks. Two samples features large vugs that contain laminated silt, and one specimen has numerous parallel pipe vesicles 1- 4 cm long (Fig. S1).

Hyaloclastite erratics are rounded, highly vesicular and contain subangular to subrounded unaltered amygdaloidal basalt fragments (up to 5 cm) in an orange-brown palagonite (hydrous alteration of volcanic glass) matrix with glass and euhedral-subhedral olivine crystals up to 2 mm. The hyaloclastite specimens are highly porous and friable. Even gentle handling dislodges fragments of palagonite. Phases identified from the palagonite by X-ray diffraction are dominantly feldspars and olivine, but also include zeolites such as chabazite and phillipsite (Fig. S3).

### *3.2 Geochronology*

The zeolite-free groundmass from 5 samples produced  $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  plateau ages ranging from  $17 \pm 0.4$  Ma to  $20.6 \pm 0.3$  Ma (Figs. 3 & S4; Table S2). For the hyaloclastite specimen, the age is on groundmass from an amygdaloidal basalt fragment within the hyaloclastite matrix. The assumption used in all of the step heating spectra is that the initial argon was atmospheric. Alternative ways to evaluate ages (i.e., isochrones) were explored and described in Fig. S5; they do not result in significant changes to our interpretation. Only 3 of the >600 detrital zircon grains

measured from Mt. Howe till have late Oligocene/early Miocene U-Pb ages:  $19.4 \pm 0.9$  Ma,  $23.1 \pm 0.5$  Ma, and  $25.0 \pm 0.9$  Ma (Fig. 3; Table S3). Of the ~4000 detrital zircon grains we have previously analyzed from the Ross Embayment (Licht et al., 2014), these are the only three grains < 90 Ma. The rocks from which they are derived are not known and no zircon grains were found in the Mt. Howe basalt thin sections, therefore these detrital zircon grains were derived from an as yet undiscovered host rock. Because zircon may be metamorphically altered, we measured the Th/U ratio for all three grains and found values of >0.5, which indicate primary magmatic origin rather than recrystallization due to metamorphism (Hoskin and Black, 2000).

## **4. Discussion**

### *4.1 Timing and source of Cenozoic volcanism in the region*

Several datasets allow us to evaluate the timing and source of volcanic activity that produced the samples recovered from Mt. Howe. Ages from four of the five dated basalts are similar and centered around 17.5 Ma (Fig. 3). Previously studied basalts outcropping ~50 km downstream from Mt. Howe at Sheridan Bluff (Fig. 1) are  $19.2 \pm 0.4$  Ma and  $18.3 \pm 0.4$  Ma; a sample from nearby Mt. Early is  $15.9 \pm 0.3$  Ma (Fig. 3) (Stump et al., 1980). Together, samples from Mt. Howe, Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early indicate a period of igneous activity in the range of ~25–16 Ma in the Scott Glacier catchment. Two detrital zircon grains are slightly older than any measured ages on basalts in this region. The zircon may represent a felsic expression of magmatism (Bird, 1979), though no felsic pebbles of Miocene age were found in the moraine. If the foundering model explains this magmatic activity, it suggests contact melting and recrystallization of the lower crust associated with the high temperatures from the rising asthenosphere. However this explanation is in conflict with the Th/U ratios suggesting igneous origin. Regardless of the source of the zircon, the ages of the samples described here put these rocks among the oldest dated lavas associated within the entire WARS (Kyle, 1990).



In the search for a source of the Mt. Howe erratics, we examined aeromagnetic data upstream of Mt. Howe (Studinger et al., 2006). The profile data show an isolated, circular, high-amplitude negative anomaly (-740 nT) that is ~7 km in diameter (Fig. 4). This anomaly is centered at -87.892°, -149.996° about 60 km inland, and upflow, from the moraine where the samples were collected (Fig. 1). The shape, strength and sign of the anomaly are consistent with reversely magnetized volcanic rocks (Studinger et al., 2006) and we suggest this is the likely source of the early Miocene volcanic rocks found in the glacial deposits of the Mt. Howe moraine. An early Miocene volcanic center (EMVC) at the site of the negative magnetic anomaly would mark the southernmost extent of Cenozoic volcanism identified on Earth. If it is the source of most of the Mt. Howe basalts, the timing can be further refined to 17.399-16.807 Ma. This is based on the age of a magnetic reversal that overlaps with the central age of volcanic activity (Fig. 3). Unfortunately we could not confirm this possibility from the magnetic signature of our samples because they are erratics.

The magnetic anomaly is located along the margin of the East Antarctic craton, an inferred rift margin transfer zone, and along strike of an E-W oriented fault (Studinger et al., 2006; Goodge and Finn, 2010). Together these indicate that the EMVC may be associated with a weakness in the crust, similar to the Erebus Volcanic Province (Wilson, 1999), though its relationship to the West Antarctic Rift system is not clear. The site also lies at the southern margin of a low velocity zone within the upper mantle described by Shen et al. (2018) in the southern TAM. They interpret this as a region of lithospheric foundering where the warm asthenosphere is shallow (<50 km), having replaced the cold lithosphere. One of the predicted consequences of this foundering is volcanism and the age of the volcanic rocks from Mt. Howe can provide constraints on the timing of the foundering. Shen et al. (2018) suggest that the process may have begun in the late Cretaceous when the TAM shows the onset of exhumation

events (Fitzgerald, 2002) or in the Miocene, as rifting in the Ross Sea (Adare Trough and Terror Rift) progressed and lithospheric foundering developed beneath the southern TAM. Our geochronology data clearly support the latter interpretation, with evidence for the earliest magmatic activity indicated by the detrital zircon ages of  $23.1 \pm 0.5$  and  $25 \pm 0.9$  Ma. The duration of basaltic volcanism associated with foundering is on the order of  $< 5$  My.

#### *4.2 Style of eruption and implication for climatic conditions*

Glaciovolcanic eruptive sequences have been described elsewhere in Antarctica and show evidence of subaqueous/subglacial eruptions (e.g., Stump et al., 1980; Smellie et al., 2011; Antibus et al., 2014). Stump et al. (1980) described pillow lavas and hyaloclastites at Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early that were interpreted to indicate early Miocene subglacial eruptions. The EMVC identified in this study is  $\sim 110$  km poleward of known exposures of Miocene volcanic rocks from Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early (Fig. 1) and follow the trend of the axis of the upper Scott Glacier. Geochemical and geochronological analysis of Sheridan Bluff volcanics show a similar composition and crystallization age to the Mt. Howe volcanic erratics (Figs. 2 and 3) (Stump et al., 1980), therefore we infer that petrogenesis for the two groups was similar. We note that the presence of olivine in the Mt. Howe basalts is consistent with volcanism associated with early stages of Miocene rifting suggested by Shen et al. (2018). Although the lack of stratigraphic information from the Mt. Howe erratics prevents us from making a direct comparison about eruptive style, the thin section characteristics, combined with macroscopic properties, including laminated sediment infill of large vugs and hyaloclastite, are all consistent with subaqueous (subglacial) eruption in the early Miocene. We cannot completely rule out the possibility of subaerial eruption that came into contact with water. Subsequently, the rocks experienced little transport and were covered by ice until their eventual entrainment and transport to the Mt. Howe moraine 60 km downstream. They were collected from an area of the

moraine where rocks show minimal recent chemical weathering, consistent with surface exposure ages indicating that they have been on the moraine surface no longer than the last glacial cycle (Mathieson et al., 2012).

The most complete records of Antarctica's early Miocene climatic conditions come from the Cape Roberts and ANDRILL-2A marine cores in the McMurdo Sound region (>1100 km from Mt. Howe). Both sites record numerous fluctuations by temperate glaciers during this time (e.g., Barrett, 2007; Passchier et al., 2011). The nearest Neogene terrestrial glacial deposits to Mt. Howe are Sirius Group sequences located at the head of Shackleton Glacier. They are interpreted to represent deposition by warm-based ice, likely thinner than the modern ice sheet (Hambrey et al., 2003). The age of the deposits is not well constrained but reported to be Miocene-Pliocene. As noted above Stump et al. (1980) interpreted the basalts at Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early to have been subglacially erupted and indicate the presence of an ice sheet since the early Miocene. Both of these terrestrial datasets are consistent with the idea of glaciation during the time of eruption at the EMVC upstream of Mt. Howe. Without the context provided by outcrop exposures, we cannot say with certainty whether this was a subglacial eruption or an eruption into a glacial lake.

## **5. Conclusions**

A suite of volcanic erratics from the southernmost moraine on Earth records Miocene volcanism only ~230 km from the South Pole. The erratics include: (a) subalkaline/alkaline, olivine-bearing amygdaloidal/vesicular basalts whose chemistry indicates within-plate volcanism and (b) hyaloclastites containing basalt fragments, glass and olivine. The textures indicate subaqueous (likely subglacial) eruptions occurred 20.6 - 17 Ma. The volcanic center that likely produced these basalts is 60 km upstream of the Mt. Howe moraine at the location of a

subglacial, circular -740 nT magnetic anomaly (Studinger et al., 2006). Three detrital zircon grains from the moraine till also indicate Neogene igneous activity, with the oldest occurring 25 Ma. Together the samples from Mt. Howe expand the known extent of volcanism southward into the East Antarctic interior by ~110 km. The data are consistent with the suggestion of lithospheric foundering beneath the southern TAM and provide evidence that the duration of volcanism was likely <5 My and that substantial crustal heating may have begun as early as 25 Ma.

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## Figure Captions

Figure 1. (a) Bedrock elevation of Scott Glacier area (GeoMapApp). White box shows location of magnetic survey shown in Fig. 4. MH=Mt. Howe sampling area, ME=Mount Early, SB=Sheridan Bluff, location of other Miocene volcanics; EMVC=early Miocene Volcanic center. Inset map of Antarctica shows study area (purple box) and the regions with Cenozoic volcanism (yellow circles), including ANDRILL core (AND-2A). WA=West Antarctica, EA=East Antarctica. Hatched line (blue) highlights low velocity (<4.37 km/s) area of uppermost mantle from Shen et al. (2018). (b) Digital Globe image showing the Mt. Howe moraine adjacent to the Scott Glacier. White areas are snow covered, light gray are blue ice areas and dark gray is either debris covered ice (moraine) or bedrock.

Figure 2. Total alkalis versus silica content (wt.%) showing samples from this study compared to a compilation from Panter et al. (2009) for AND-2A samples. Major elements recalculated to 100%, volatile free, following LeBas et al. (1986). Samples from this study (triangles) are basalts (Table S1), and are most similar to northern Victoria Land (NVL) volcanics. Two samples fall outside the known NVL range but show similarities to volcanic clasts from the AND-2A core (Fig. 1). Sheridan Bluff (circles) basalts and trachybasalts are from Stump et al., 1990 and S. Hart (Table S4). Data sources for comparative compositional fields: Erebus volcanics: LeMasurier & Thomson (1990), Kyle et al. (1992); Marie Byrd Land (MBL) volcanics: LeMasurier & Thomson (1990), Rocchi et al. (2006).

Figure 3. Rank plot of Ar-Ar ages on basalts from Mt. Howe (squares), detrital zircon U-Pb ages from Mt. Howe till (circles) along with K-Ar ages from Sheridan Bluff and Mt. Early (diamonds) from Stump et al. (1980). Vertical lines highlight the age range of the magnetic reversal that overlaps with four samples analyzed. A = amygdaloidal basalt, H = hyaloclastite clast, V = vesicular basalt with sediment infill. The magnetic reversal (white) that overlaps with the Ar-Ar ages is 17.399-16.807 Ma (geomagnetic timescale of Huestis and Acton, 1997).

Figure 4. (a) Profile view of ice surface and bedrock elevation along with magnetic anomaly along -150°. Double arrow shows position of ice divide. (b) Top view of total field magnetic anomaly in box shown on Fig. 1 (modified from Studinger et al., 2006). Blue arrow highlights EMVC.

Figure 1.

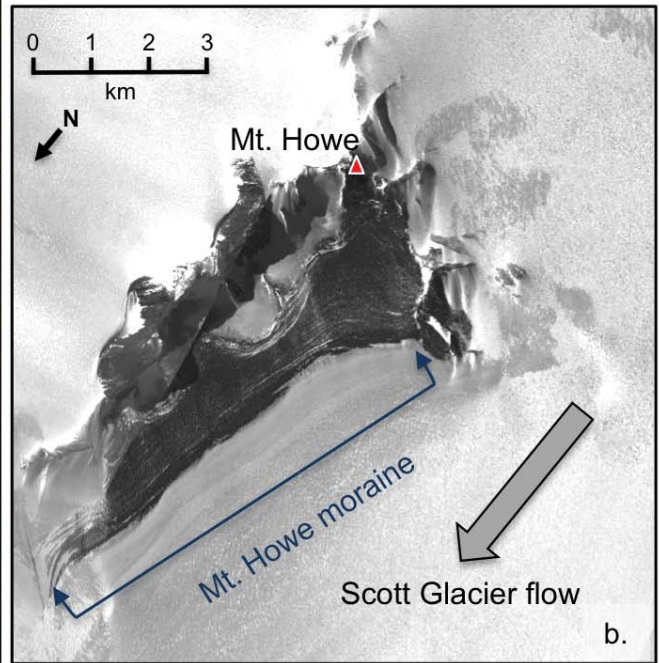
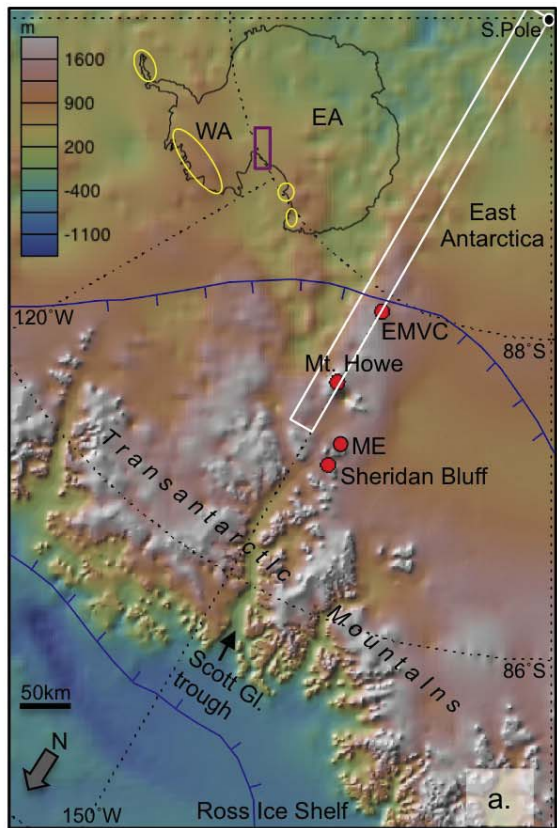


Figure 2.

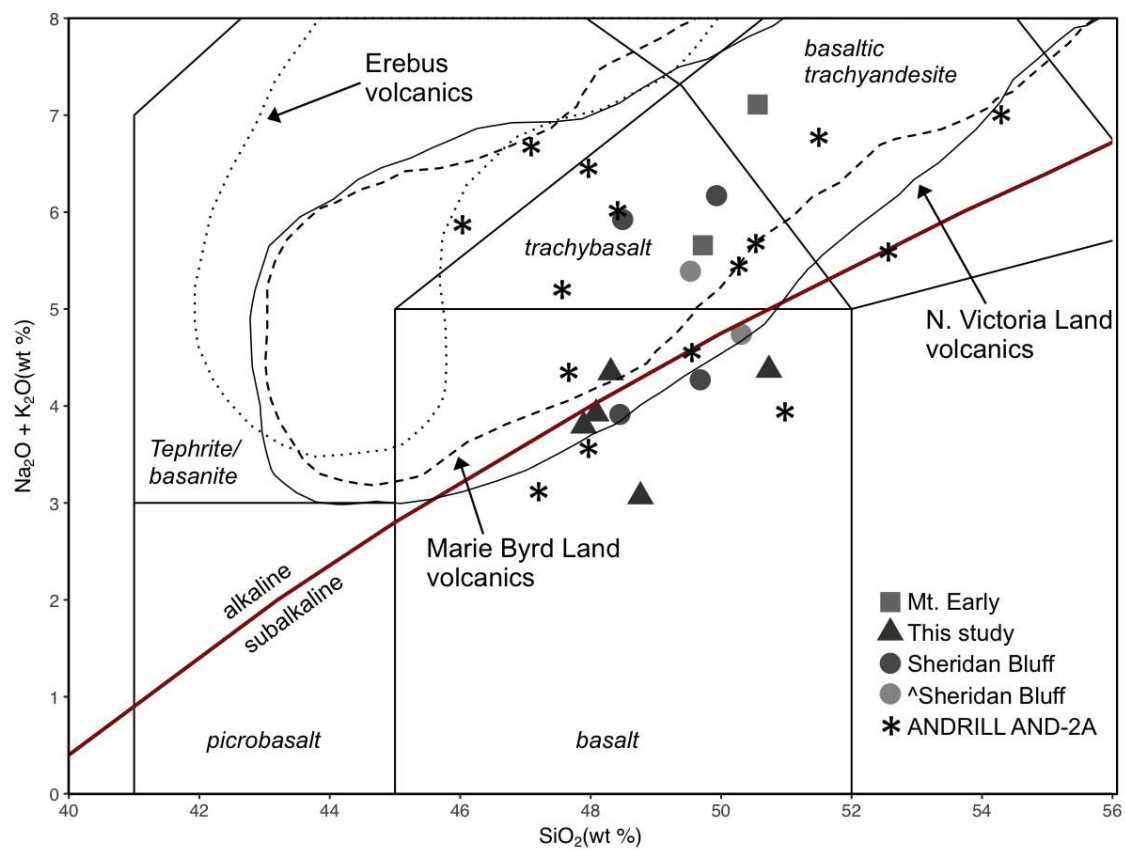


Figure 3.

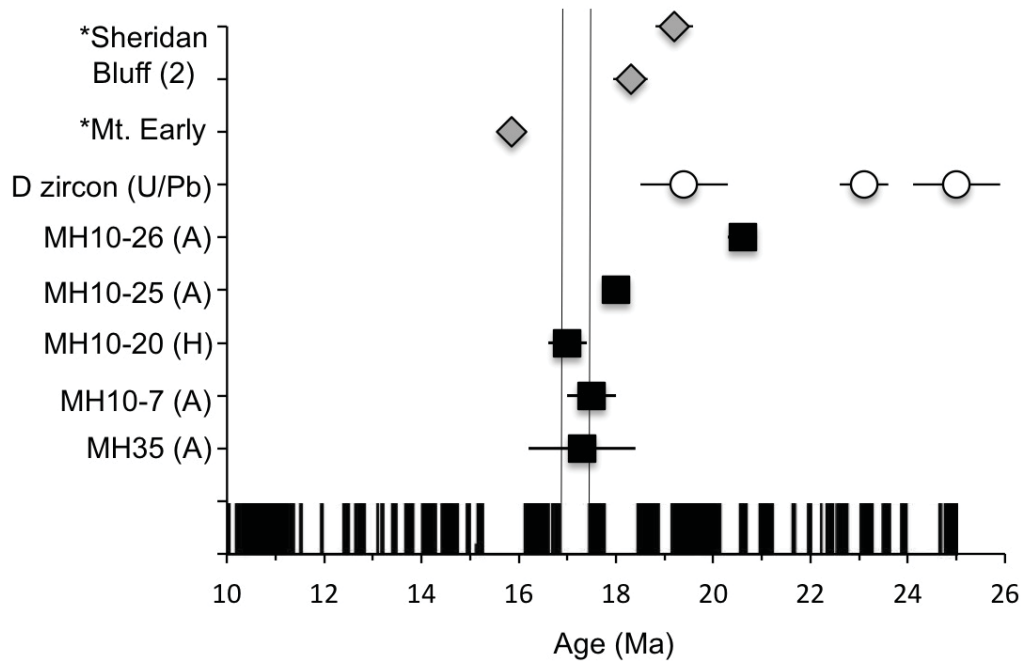


Figure 4.



